

## **Courthouse assault was preventable, union says**

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A vicious attack on a Crown prosecutor could have been prevented if the province had installed search gates at major B.C. courthouses, the union representing sheriffs says.

A veteran Crown lawyer was heading into the Prince George law courts Thursday morning when he was suddenly punched in the face. The prosecutor crumpled to the ground and was transported to hospital. His alleged assailant was taken into custody on charges including aggravated assault.

Dean Purdy, spokesman for the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union, said his organization met with then-attorney-general Barry Penner in June and repeated its longstanding request for search gates. Mr. Purdy said the union was told the measure would be too expensive.

"The threat of violence is growing in all our courthouses. ... The safety of the judges, court staff and public is at risk until this is done," he said in an interview.

Speaking specifically of Thursday's attack, Mr. Purdy said: "It would have been preventable."

Prince George RCMP were first called to a men's shelter around 8:20 a.m. after receiving reports someone was being violent toward staff, police spokeswoman Constable Lesley Smith said.

By the time Mounties arrived on scene, the suspect had fled.

Constable Smith said the man arrived at the courthouse around 8:30 a.m., shortly after he smashed the window of a vehicle on the street.

The man then allegedly caused a disturbance inside the law courts, yelling and threatening people. Mr. Purdy said two sheriffs were pursuing the man when he ran out the front door and saw the prosecutor, at whom he threw a punch. The sheriffs then held the man until RCMP arrived.

Police initially believed the attack on the prosecutor was random. But after interviewing witnesses, Constable Smith said that particular element of the man's rampage could have been deliberate.

"Witnesses at the scene heard the suspect state something to the Crown prosecutor, which is why we believe this assault was targeted," she said. Constable Smith did not know exactly what the man uttered.

The 40-year-old suspect is well known to police and faces charges for both the incident at the courthouse and the men's shelter. Constable Smith would not disclose how RCMP know the man, saying only that he has had several run-ins with the Mounties.

Mr. Purdy said B.C.'s only courthouse with permanent search gates – the 222 Main St. courthouse in downtown Vancouver – has been effective at reducing risks and a large number of weapons have been confiscated. The search gates at the Main Street courthouse are located right by the front door and the sheriffs are in position in case anyone comes in and creates a disturbance.

Samiran Lakshman, president of the B.C. Crown Counsel Association, said the lack of security gates in the province's courthouses is an ongoing concern for prosecutors.

“You can’t rely on these safety assessments on a case-by-case basis,” he said. “You never know when there may be a threat. It may be random or it may be targeted, but we need to have the physical infrastructure to provide for the safety of those in the court system.”

B.C. Solicitor-General Shirley Bond said the province is working to increase the number of sheriffs on duty in courthouses, but she wouldn’t say if more security gates are under consideration.

“We’re working within the capital allocations we have to improve courthouses,” she said. “The safety of courtroom personnel is very important to us.”

Last May, the provincial government slashed the hours for courthouse sheriffs, mostly in Metro Vancouver. As a result, trials were adjourned or stood down because judges were concerned about safety.

In June, the government retreated and restored the sheriffs’ hours, but the B.C. Government and Service Employees’ Union warned that courthouse safety remains a concern. The union noted that the number of sheriffs has gone from 525 just a few years ago to approximately 385 now.

Neil MacKenzie, spokesman for the Criminal Justice Branch, said it’s “extremely rare” for a Crown prosecutor to be assaulted.

Mr. MacKenzie said he could not release any information on how the suspect and the victim might have known each other.